

Conclusions

Any discussion of postsecondary education must include an assessment of how well it is serving its current participants and the nation as a whole. That assessment, in keeping with the postsecondary education world itself, should be multidimensional in nature. This particular essay has restricted its coverage to some aspects of access and choice that can be gleaned from NELS:88 data. Within this scope, then, one should attempt to measure postsecondary education in terms of how well it serves racial and ethnic minorities, and those on the lower socioeconomic rungs in comparison with those whose backgrounds and circumstances are more privileged.

With regard to gender, it is important to investigate whether young females hold educational expectations different from their male counterparts, and whether in high school females are represented in programs similar to males, test as well as males, and receive diplomas at the same rate as males. Compared to males, it is important to test whether females follow similar postsecondary education paths--with regard to the type, timing, and intensity of enrollment. These and other differences that can be detected for women versus men can, and should, be examined for the other categories of potential barriers and inequalities as well. This section provides each of these comparisons.

Gender. Data from NELS:88/94 (the Third Follow-up) suggest that females in the 1988 eighth grade cohort held similar or even higher educational expectations compared to males. In comparison with their male counterparts, a higher percentage of women also chose or were "tracked into" academic over vocational or general programs. A smaller percentage of women than men scored in the lowest 1992 test quartile, and a higher percentage of women scored in the middle two test quartiles, while there was no observed difference between men and women in the highest test quartile. A smaller percentage of women than men failed to file postsecondary application by 1992, and a greater percentage of women filed multiple postsecondary applications. Thus, on these various access comparisons, which hold for the overall 1988 eighth grade cohort and for the high tested achievement quartile, women appear to be at least on a par with men in terms of being positioned to take advantage of postsecondary educational opportunities

With regard to choice, women and men in NELS:88 enrolled in public and private not-for-profit four-year institutions by 1994 in approximately equal percentages. Women attending four-year institutions also enrolled out of state, attended full-time, and attended an institution of their choice at the same rates as men. Again, these conclusions hold both for the aggregate NELS:88 cohort with postsecondary enrollment by 1994 and for those in the highest 1992 test quartile. Thus, on the criterion of choice, postsecondary education again appears to be meeting the needs of women at least as well as it does for men. There are few observed sex differences across NELS:88 categories, and where there are differences, they tend to favor women. On the criteria of access and choice, then, there do not appear to be postsecondary education barriers that affect women disproportionately

Race/ethnicity. While in high school, a higher percentage of Asian students reported the expectation of earning at least a bachelor's degree than for any racial/ethnic group, and a significantly lower percentage of Hispanics than whites held this level of expectation (there were no significant differences across other racial/ethnic categories). Asians also had higher percent enrollment in academic tracks and had higher high school graduation rates. (With regard to academic program enrollment and graduation, whites showed higher rates than blacks and Hispanics; there were no significant differences between these last two groups.) Within the highest achievement test quartile, racial/ethnic differences by enrollment or graduation disappeared, though higher percentages of Asians and Whites than blacks and Hispanics ranked in the highest quartile on the cognitive test composite.

A higher percentage of Asians than other racial/ethnic groups filed postsecondary applications and enrolled in postsecondary institutions right after high school. Again, these differences disappear in the highest test quartile. A higher proportion of blacks and Hispanics, even within the highest tested achievement quartile, exhibited two or more at-risk factors than whites and Asians. The tendency for Hispanics to enroll in public two-year colleges and for blacks to enroll out of state were the only pronounced postsecondary attendance patterns, and even these do not hold for the highest test quartile. There were no racial or ethnic differences with regard to attendance at a preferred four-year institution, or the tendency to enroll full-time in a four-year institution.

Socioeconomic status More observed differences across the potential access and choice barriers (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, or tested achievement) occur by socioeconomic status, and they occur from the outset. Educational expectations, in terms of the percentages of those who indicated achievement of at least a bachelor's degree, vary directly by socioeconomic ranking. The same is true for representation in academic tracks in high school, the rate of earning a regular high school diploma, and performance on the cognitive test battery. This pattern continues with respect to the postsecondary application process, where a smaller percentage of 1988 eighth graders in the lowest socioeconomic quartile completed applications. In turn, a smaller percentage from this group matriculated, and when they did enroll there was more delay and a higher incidence of enrollment at public two-year institutions (and in state).

On the personal side, the percentage of 1988 eighth graders who had never married by 1994, and the percentage who reported not having children, varied directly by socioeconomic status. Within the high tested achievement quartile, however, many of these socioeconomic differences disappear or are lessened.

Tested achievement Those in the highest tested achievement quartile have the fewest postsecondary access and choice barriers. Their initial expression of educational expectations in the eighth grade and their higher rate of postsecondary enrollment characterize them as well motivated. Their higher rate of out-of-state enrollment suggests that they are more mobile than their counterparts; and, for lack of a better word, their discipline as regards the timing of marriage and children position them to take better advantage of the opportunities that the heterogeneous postsecondary world has to offer.

Specifically, over 90 percent of this group want at least a baccalaureate degree from the outset. They take academic subjects in high school, receive their diplomas on time, file multiple applications, enroll soon after high school graduation (mostly in four-year institutions). On the personal side, they are saddled with fewer at-risk factors to begin with, and they do not marry or have children by their early twenties, which reduce even further the obstacles in their paths to achieving their educational goals.

When one restricts comparisons to those in the highest tested achievement quartile, some differences observed for the overall eighth grade cohort with regard to race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status disappear. This is true for type of high school program attended (i.e., academic vs. general/vocational track) and high school graduation rate. However, Asians and whites tend to exhibit significantly different levels for some of the other access and choice variables, such as at-risk factors and application patterns.

The most glaring inequalities within the high tested achievement quartile occur across socioeconomic divisions, as opposed to sex or racial/ethnic differences. Although there were no observed differences in terms of high school programs pursued or graduation rates by socioeconomic quartile, personal considerations (i.e., at-risk factors, marriage rates, and the incidence of parenthood), postsecondary application patterns and attendance, institution type (four-year versus other and in-state versus out-of-state), and intensity of enrollment were associated with one's socioeconomic grouping.

Some of these same access and choice barriers appear to be present by socioeconomic status, as opposed to sex or race/ethnicity, for the whole 1988 eighth grade cohort as well as for those in the 1992 highest tested achievement quartile.